

# Academy of the Environment keynote address: “Sustainable UGA”

November 29, 2007 · Memorial Hall Dining Room

Thank you, Mary Alice and Ian. Good afternoon, and thank you for the invitation to speak with you today. I hope that our conversation today spills out beyond this room and engages even more people.

One of the things that has pleased me in the past few years is that a campus-wide conversation about conservation and our commitment to sustainability has begun. Students, faculty, staff, and administrators have all taken it upon themselves to take action to reduce waste, conserve energy, and, as we all know, reduce water consumption. At a university like this, there are few topics or issues that truly touch all of us, and my goal today is to celebrate how you all have taken action.

I hope we all walk out of here today feeling that UGA has many great stories to tell on sustainability. Our problem is that these efforts have been dispersed across so many parts of this campus that nobody knows how good a story we have to tell.

But first, some background. There has been a real shift on how environmentalism is viewed in this country in the past decade or so. We all recall when environmentalism was a fringe issue and nobody knew what sustainability meant. I was at Pepperdine in California in the mid-1980s at the height of the environmentalist movement and was often the point person for the university on those issues. While I may have disagreed with the positions taken by some on those issues, I never doubted the sincerity of those who expressed those views. In fact, I admired the passion with which they held those views.

The reality today is that much of what the environmentalists were pushing for is mainstream today.

Who would have imagined back then that the University of Georgia would provide recycling bins for every desk and recycle up to 17 percent of its total waste each year? Who would have foreseen that UGA would install low-flow shower heads in the residence halls and low-flow toilets across campus?

Concern for the environment is a part of everyday business in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It's not a special interest; it's not a minority position; it's not a side issue. I attended a meeting of the Council of Foreign Relations' Higher Education Working Group on Global Issues a few weeks ago. This group of 50 or so college presidents, ranging from Yale to Michigan State to Cal State to Florida to Georgia, generally talks about globalization, issues involving Israel, and the Middle East, but this meeting was focused on climate change.

It is part of every construction decision we make, virtually every management decision we make, and many of our purchasing decisions.

That's what I want to call “responsible environmentalism.” It includes sustainability as part of the decision-making process. Those concerns become part of the management calculus – they don't control the process, neither are they eliminated from the process.

Let's be honest – some people will always want us to do more. Some of you may be among them. And I am sure that there is more that we *can* do in a number of areas. But I also believe that we have made great strides toward a sustainable UGA campus.

You see examples of this on the posters around this ballroom, and you'll hear much more about them from folks later on in the program, but let me highlight a few programs in particular. You'll see on Lumpkin Street the “rain gardens” at the corner of Baxter. Rainwater runs into these structures of rocks and plants, which strip out most of the oil and surface toxins, so that the water flowing back into the ecosystem is clean.

In recycling, I mentioned that UGA recycles about 17 percent of its waste, which is good, but not good enough. The Physical Plant Division is developing a pilot program to increase that number, reduce what we send to area landfills and, perhaps, generate a little revenue in the process. (You'd be disappointed if I didn't mention money, I'm sure.) They also have contracted to recycle all

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compact fluorescent light bulbs on campus, keeping mercury and other toxins out of landfills.

On North Campus, our buildings are part of a “Green Clean” initiative, which has cut down on the number of different cleaning products we use and reduced the chemicals present in those cleansers. This saves money by allowing us to buy in bulk, and it reduces toxins that can cause asthma and linger in the environment.

Also, most of you probably do not know that we have led a systemwide initiative to create an energy management plan that would serve all 35 institutions in the system. Tom Adams in Engineering Outreach has been taken the staff lead on this effort and should be congratulated for it. The plan calls for each institution to establish benchmarks for energy usage and provides funds for them to capture efficiencies in all areas. This will be tremendously helpful as we move forward.

In the built environment, the Office of University Architects under Danny Sniff has been instrumental in helping us green the campus. We have converted more than 1.5 million square feet of pavement to facilities and green space – Herty Field and Brooks Mall, among others. I am convinced that green space is not only better for the environment, it’s better for the soul.

There’s just something good about grass and trees and shrubs and flowers, and they make campus a more inviting place to be and a better learning environment.

In our transportation department, 47 of our buses are running on biodiesel, and our rental fleet uses the E-85 of ethanol and gasoline. In some areas we are using electric vehicles and compressed natural gas vehicles.

In the past year, students have led a drive to replace incandescent bulbs with low-energy, long-life fluorescents, even sponsoring competitions between residence halls.

We’re looking into ways students can purchase carbon offsets for the plane trips they take overseas for international programs.

Furthermore, I’m sure many of you saw the story a few months ago about the rooftop garden on the Geography Building. This is a great example of the way that academic interests can benefit campus life. That project was originally started by an urban geography class and grew, literally into something that could be a model.

Sustainability is sprinkled through the research and teaching interests of our faculty, from the certificate we offer in organic gardening to Tom Adams’s work on biofuels. David Stookesbury and Todd Rasmussen are among the foremost experts on our water situation, as you can read in the paper nearly ever day. Throughout the College of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences, the Warnell School of Forestry, the School of Environmental Design, and the College of Ecology, we have faculty members and students doing exceptional work that will help us not just on campus but throughout the state and indeed the world.

Nothing, of course, has made environmental issues more pressing than the water situation. Our campus has been reducing water usage long before the drought reached its current crisis level. Through October, we were down close to 10 percent in water use over year-ago levels, putting us within reach of the Governor’s target. We have not asked for and will not ask for any exemption from the restrictions. This is the time to be a good citizen and find ways to help.

The largest users of water on campus are in research labs, and we need to ask our faculty to be mindful of their water usage and to install conservation and recycling equipment wherever possible.

The Physical Plant Division is more than halfway through a plan to modernize shower heads, toilets and washing machines across campus, which will save up to 30 million gallons per year when complete.

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Dexter Adams, who is in charge of the landscaping that gives UGA the character we all value, has been planting more native species which use less water and can withstand periodic dry spells.

The “Every Drop Counts!” campaign is spreading the message that reducing water use is both an institutional and individual responsibility. The posters you have seen around campus and the website have been very effective in helping all of us see how we can each save water.

The drought remains a serious problem. I was happy to see the rain on Thanksgiving and earlier this week, but if we don't get more precipitation during the winter, the situation will be even more serious next summer. We are going to be working hard to recapture water runoff for other uses, we're going to look into the idea of drilling wells, and we need to continue discussing water issues at forums like this one as often as we can.

These are some of the recommendations of the Water Resources Task Force, which included staff, students, and faculty members, including some of our experts on hydrology, under the leadership of Kathy Pharr and Lonnie Brown. I want to thank that group for helping orient us to the steps we'll need to take in the very near future.

Finally, let me talk to you about our philosophy on new construction. We are absolutely committed to a sustainable approach to new facilities, and have exercised that approach in the most recent major projects on campus such as the Coverdell Center and the new Lamar Dodd School of Art. And while the Red & Black may disagree, Tate II will be the greenest building on campus in both construction and operation.

The building has a gray-water system to capture condensation from air conditioning and filter it for plumbing use. It will use natural lighting wherever possible to minimize the need for artificial lights. We are using low-emissions material in things like carpeting and adhesives. The building could

meet LEED Certification standards and possibly even LEED Silver standards, depending on how construction progresses.

We have not applied for LEED certification on Tate, primarily because the Office of University Architects has the in-house expertise to achieve very comparable efficiencies without paying tens of thousands of dollars for a third-party verifier. We find ways to save time, money and energy throughout construction, and I am confident in our commitment to sustainable construction.

In the Tate Center expansion, it was clear from the student advisory board that having that facility be a model of campus sustainability was important. We committed to that goal from the beginning.

During the construction of the parking deck, which will serve as the base of Tate II, some of the pilings had to be driven deeper than expected, and we struck water. Normally, that water would simply be pumped into Tanyard Creek and washed downstream, but the contractors are using that water to mix concrete, thereby reducing the amount of water needed from the Athens-Clarke system. Some of the excess is also being used for irrigation.

There is more that we are doing and, frankly, more that we could be doing, but I hope you see that we take these issues seriously. I am interested, though, in how we can institutionalize this commitment to sustainability, and I hope you will agree to help me with that.

In recent years, some of America's top public universities have created offices of sustainability to monitor activities promoting the conservation of natural resources and reducing waste products generated by normal operations. Without a doubt, it is incumbent on such universities, which are cities in themselves, to capture efficiencies and reduce resource inputs and outputs in this economy. Beyond our current issues with water, we are experiencing new price shocks in energy

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almost daily, and we at the University of Georgia owe it to the state to be as responsible as we can in our use of all resources.

However, we also have a responsibility to the state, our students and the community to be the best university we can be, and we are falling behind our peers on faculty hiring and faculty salaries. Improving both has to be our major priority as an institution over the next several years. As such, I am going to be a hard sell on creating new administrative positions or offices until we are in a better position with our faculty.

Nonetheless, we do need a better way of organizing and disseminating information about sustainable practices across this campus.

As such, I want to make a request of you in the Academy. I would like Ian and Mary Alice and other members they invite to examine how other colleges are managing sustainability and what structures are most effective. I want to know what works elsewhere, and what problems other institutions have found. I want to know how effective different models have been at reducing environmental footprints and saving money. I would like you to continue making suggestions to Ralph Johnson about specific things we should do.

As I mentioned earlier, it is crucial that such an effort involve faculty, staff, and students, because ultimately this is an issue of campus stewardship, and everyone needs to have an ownership stake in this process.

Thank you again for everything you have done, and I look forward to working with you all to make the University of Georgia a little bit better each day and a little bit greener every day.

Potential Q&A topics:

Creating an Office of Sustainability, as most peer and aspirational institutions have done

Joining the Presidential Commitment on Climate Change

Mandating LEED certification for buildings, as Georgia Tech and Emory have done

Cancelling or scaling back football games because of water usage

What happens if water becomes really scarce next spring and summer, as predicted—under what conditions will UGA close?